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AUTHOR Bloem, Patricia L.

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INSTITUTION Kent State Univ., OH. Ohio Literacy Resource Center.
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ABSTRACT

This publication attempts to answer some common questions from adult basic education and General Educational Development teachers about the practice of using children's literature in the adult literacy classroom. Answers include the following: some books in the children's literature market are meant to be read and enjoyed by a wide diversity of ages; adults are not offended if children's literature is used as long as appropriate titles are chosen and they are presented carefully; benefits are expanded opportunities for student comprehension and enjoyment, suitability of picture books to short periods of instruction, and wide availability of books; and since books are available in the science, social studies, reading, and writing skills, children's informational books are a wonderful way to introduce concepts, demonstrate a point, or provide information to supplement textbooks. Suggested uses for children's books include reading aloud at the beginning of each class, projection onto an overhead screen so that students can read together, offered as writing prompts, offered as good writing models, and expansion of interdisciplinary units. The publication proposes that the practice of using children's literature rests on the whole language approach. It concludes by listing these programs that currently use children's literature: family literacy programs; Beginning with Books program, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh; library discussion groups; and an adult basic education class of the Ohio Literacy Resource Center. Contains 27 references. (YLB)

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Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

Research To Practice

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BRINGING BOOKS TO ADULT LITERACY CLASSROOMS

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by Patricia L. Bloem

"The first book I ever read?" the adult literacy student answered. "I don't remember any from school or from my childhood. And when I started ABE classes, we only read from textbooks. But one day my teacher brought in a pile of picture books about African-Americans. Some about Harriet Tubman. One about Zora Neale Hurston. One was a story about a slave girl who sewed quilts with pictures that told how to find the Underground Railroad. Our teacher told us to help ourselves and that got me reading."

Children's literature in the adult literacy classroom? Some teachers, imagining a GED-aspiring, out-of-work, macho truck driver sitting at a desk with Curious George, shake their heads in disbelief that anyone could be so insensitive to students' self-concepts and interests. But others, like the teacher of the woman quoted above, worry that the usual skill-and-drill approach to reading in ABE classrooms may be related to retention problems and fear that their students may acquire reading skills but not a reading habit.

Is there integrity to the practice of using children's literature in the adult literacy classroom? A growing number of educators and researchers think there is. Here are some common questions from ABE and GED teachers about this practice.

Aren't picture books and young adult books meant for children?

Yes, some of them, like Curious George, are meant to be read by children or by parents to children. But these are not the ones we recommend for use in adult literacy classrooms. Other books in the children's literature market are meant to be read and enjoyed by a wide diversity of ages.

- "I like writing picture books because that medium gives me a chance to capture in a brief space what I consider life's profound experiences...I write a picture book that speaks to any person, any age," said Cynthia Rylant, award-winning author. Other writers have said the same.

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- Well-crafted picture books have intrinsic appeal for a wide-range of readers (Neal & Moore, 1992; Rief, 1992).
- Picture books often raise issues that demand maturity and life experience (Neal & Moore, 1992). Patricia MacLachlan's short chapter books, Journey, Baby, and Sarah, Plain and Tall, for example, have been marketed for middle-grade school children. But all three can be read on several levels, and adults are able to appreciate them with greater depth and maturity born from experience.

As picture books have progressed from simple to complex in story telling and theme, from childish to sophisticated in subject matter and art, educators of all levels are gaining new respect for them. In fact, many of the current nonfiction picture books seem to be cousins of the old-fashioned coffeetable book, a genre clearly intended for adults.

Will the use of children's literature with my adult students offend them or make them feel as though I am treating them as children?

- A group of us at the Ohio Literacy Resource Center has been working to identify appropriate books and field testing them in a variety of adult literacy settings. It is our experience that adults are not offended as long as you choose appropriate titles and present them carefully. Just as most people--of all ages--love to be read to, so too are adults pleased to be exposed to the colorful and engrossing world of literature.

What are the benefits of using children's literature during class session?

- First-rate children's literature offers the same benefits that any high quality literature or art offers.
- Because these books employ the double media of print and illustration, the possibilities for students' comprehension and enjoyment are expanded (Bishop & Hickman, 1992).
- Picture books are suitable for short periods of instruction, (Neal & Moore, 1992), the time allotment typical of ABE or GED classes.
- Multicultural texts for a diversity of students can be used to build awareness of other perspectives.
- Even new readers will be able to find adult-appropriate picture books on their reading levels and will not be daunted by the length--which may be a great motivator.
- Children's literature is widely available in public libraries; therefore the cost to your program is practically nonexistent.

But I am supposed to teach science, social studies, reading and writing skills. Won't this add another subject to my already full curriculum?

Not necessarily. Some teachers take reading time for children's literature. But many books are available in the subjects you teach, and children's informational books are a wonderful way to introduce concepts, demonstrate a point, or provide information to supplement textbooks.

- They supplement whatever topic is being studied (Rief, 1992), especially social studies, visual literacy, and critical thinking (Danielson, 1992).
- Picture books are the perfect tool for illuminating science topics, no matter what the age of the learner, argues Brazee (1992). Picture books can rekindle scientific curiosity.

How can I use these books in the classroom?

There are dozens of ways to introduce books into the curriculum.

- Some teachers begin every class by reading a poem or a picture book aloud, simply for the enjoyment of the literature.
- Some teachers project the book onto an overhead screen so the class can read the text together (Wadlington & Hicks, 1995).
- Picture books and short novels make wonderful writing prompts and can provoke good journal writing.
- Level One ABE teachers may want to offer wordless books, such as Anno's Journey (Anno, 1992) and ask students to create their own texts. They may share the photographs from Evans' and Rylant's book Something Permanent (1994) and ask students to write a paragraph on each photo.
- Picture book and young adult biographies often offer good writing models. Teachers may ask students to inverview each other, write short biographies of their classmates, and share them with the class.
- During class time or for homework, students can read books that make abstract concepts come to life. A reading of Hamanaka's The Journey, for example, will enrich a study of World War II. The study of Ohio history will be deepened by reading the short novel The Borning Room (Fleischman, 1991) or by the picture book Aurora Means Dawn (Sanders, 1989).
- Interdisciplinary thematic units can be broadened by use of children's literature. Somerset Maughm's classic story "Appointment in Samarra," for example, has been stunningly illustrated in the picture book Appointment and would well serve adults studying the theme of death. Certain tales, such as Through the Mickle Woods (Gregory, 1992), do the same.
- ESL teachers will find children's literature a rich resource for oral presentations, cultural presentations, vocabulary expansion, or class discussion on journeys and immigration.
- Classes that use a problem-posing model will find lively fictional examples for their work, for example, in Levine's Pearl Moscowitz' Last Stand. (See Using Problem-Posing Dialogue in Adult Literacy Education for details about the problem-posing model.)

On what theoretical foundation does this practice rest?

Particularly those theorists who approach literacy from a whole language perspective believe that there are sound educational reasons to connect adult learners with picture books and young adult novels.

- An environment that combines learning to read with opportunities to listen, speak, write, and think is the most appropriate learning environment for adult literacy students (Weibel, 1994).
- Teachers exploring inquiry learning will find the use of children's literature consonant with its philosophies and practices.

What kinds of programs currently use children's literature?

- For several years, researchers and educators have been touting the use of picture books with adults participating in family literacy programs. (Doneson, 1991; Handel & Goldsmith, 1989; Sharp, 1991).
- The Beginning with Books program from the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, winner of an IRA award, is attempting to break the cycle of nonreading by focusing on the pleasures of reading picture books and instituting Read Aloud Parents Clubs. The literacy benefits that develop from this kind of program are for both parent and child (Segel, 1994).
- Library discussion groups, such as Connections from New Hampshire or A Feel for Books from Washington D.C., are involving adult learners with both picture books and young adult novels (Morgenthaler, 1993; Stanek, 1993).
- Thus far the Ohio Literacy Resource Center has field-tested two of MacLachlan's novels (Journey, Baby) with an ABE class of five adults; Rylant's short stories with individual ABE students; and a variety of picture books, poetry books, and young adult novels on African-American themes in a family literacy setting. In all cases, the adult learners have enjoyed the experience and asked for more books.

The use of children's literature in the adult literacy classroom demonstrates the teacher's belief that literacy growth is not a quick fix, something acquired after a short-term period of study. Too often adult literacy programs seem based on the assumption that if learners work hard on skills for six months, they will have acquired literacy, as though it is a set of skills the adult can "get" from a tutor (Kazemek, 1985).

Teachers who use children's literature in their classrooms are making visible their belief that reading is for delight as well as instruction, for aesthetic purposes as well as functional uses. Of course reading is a tool for adults. But it is also an experience that feeds the soul.

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